



## The transatlantic Thames: Anglo-American tensions on the Victorian 'stream of pleasure'

Thomas Ruys Smith

To cite this article: Thomas Ruys Smith (2021) The transatlantic Thames: Anglo-American tensions on the Victorian 'stream of pleasure', *Comparative American Studies An International Journal*, 18:1, 38-58, DOI: [10.1080/14775700.2021.1873024](https://doi.org/10.1080/14775700.2021.1873024)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14775700.2021.1873024>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 21 Feb 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 131



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



OPEN ACCESS



Check for updates

## The transatlantic Thames: Anglo-American tensions on the Victorian ‘stream of pleasure’

Thomas Ruys Smith

School of Art, Media and American Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

### ABSTRACT

While it is widely understood that rivers took on new symbolic power as avatars of nationalism in the late nineteenth century, less examined is their use as a space for Transatlantic cultural flow, and transnational commentary and critique. This article explores the ways in which a variety of Americans abroad in this period centred the Thames – newly charged with nationalist sentiment – in their accounts of Britain. In particular, it analyses Elizabeth Robins and Joseph Pennell’s travel narrative *The Stream of Pleasure*, first published as the lead article in the ‘Midsummer Holiday Issue’ of *The Century Magazine* in 1889, as an exemplary text in which both artist and writer play with the image of the river in ways that chime with much wider Transatlantic debates at this moment.

### KEYWORDS

Rivers; Thames; transatlantic; transnational; Elizabeth Robins Pennell; Joseph Pennell; tourism

In the late nineteenth century rivers became newly positioned as potent symbols of national identity. As Tricia Cusack has outlined, the ‘growth of nationalism’ at this moment ‘created a demand for the creation and representation of national landscapes in which rivers provided significant points of reference’ (2007, 101). The cultural characteristics of rivers (for example, their implication in national histories, their putative role as the foundational site for a nation state and its origin myths, their use as borders, their place in trade and transportation, their simultaneous evocation of both change and permanence) gave them their central role in this process. But as Cusack also outlines, this was a development that required significant cultural effort: ‘The identification and reification of a national river provides assurances of continuity and a vivid image for the national imagination, but it does not do so naturally and much ideological work is performed by and through the riverscape’ (2007, 102). Few rivers were as embroiled in this process as the Thames. In some ways, this was a surprising turn of events. Around mid-century, the river had reached a nadir: pollution levels from human sewage and the other industrial effluents that poured into its waters from towns and cities along its length had turned the Thames into a toxic soup. The infamous Great Stink of 1858 concentrated political attention on this issue (see Ashton 2017). As sewers were constructed and the railways removed some of the industrial traffic from the river, conditions began to improve. While parts of the river remained contaminated and repellent long into the next century, as early as 1875 H. R. Robertson in *Life on the Upper Thames* could boast, ‘The idea of drinking the water of the Thames is no doubt very repugnant to those who

**CONTACT** Thomas Ruys Smith  [Thomas.Smith@uea.ac.uk](mailto:Thomas.Smith@uea.ac.uk)  University of East Anglia

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

may live near town; but in the case of our up-river friends much pity need not be wasted on that score. The perfect clearness of the river is at times quite startling' (1875, 73).

In a few years, then, the Thames was transformed from a national disgrace to a symbolically charged space for leisure and pleasure – particularly, as Robertson's account suggests, the Upper Thames, especially the stretch of the river between Oxford and Teddington. Resurrecting ideas that stretched back to the sixteenth century and even earlier, as Paul Readman has outlined, the landscape of the Upper Thames 'supported constructions of national identity through its associations with commerce, culture and – most important of all – the course of history' (2018, 251). Accordingly, as Alison Byerly has described, a journey up the Thames became 'a timeless journey into the heart of England [...] a route into some essential but generalised aspect of England itself [...] that transcends the specific geography of the landscape traversed, and becomes a journey into the past, into the future, or into an idealised England' (2013, 85–86).

A profound fashion for recreation along the river took hold and, in D. G. Wilson's words, 'from the 1870s thousands began to flock to the river in the summer months to participate in pleasure-boating. Ancient riverside inns and boat yards, built originally for the barge trade were quickly adapted to cater for the new trend' (1997, xi). People rowed, punted, picnicked, painted and angled on the river – all while, on some level, communing with resonant ideas of England and Englishness. In turn, tapping into its new popularity, an equally numerous horde of Victorian writers turned to the Thames to take stock of the country – what it had been, what it was, what it could be. The collection of poems that cemented Oscar Wilde's early fame in 1881 contained, in the opening lines of 'The Burden of Itys', a vivid example of this new trend: 'This English Thames is holier far than Rome' (Wilde 1881, 63). Jerome K. Jerome lampooned these trends in *Three Men in a Boat* (1889), whilst also capitalising on them; Constance MacEwen responded to Jerome with *Three Women in One Boat* (1891); William Morris placed the river at the centre of his *Utopian News from Nowhere* (1890); Joseph Conrad used the Thames as a point of contact between England and the iniquities of empire in *Heart of Darkness* (1899). The adventures of Alice, and Mole and Ratty, and the Water Babies, all took in the river too. As late as 1909, H. G. Wells could still explicitly play with the Thames' mythic national qualities, having his semi-autobiographical narrator declare in *Tono Bungay*, 'To run down the Thames [...] is to run one's hand over the pages in the book of England from end to end [...] I seemed in a new and parallel manner to be passing all England in review' (1909, 484–86). At the same time there emerged a plethora of touristic guides to the river – a textual support network that offered Thames tourists advice, information and entertainment in equal measure. These guides, too, emphasised the central role that the river had played in the process of nation building. Edmund Ollier, for example, in a passage from 1885 that was reprinted in the Victoria Steamboat Associations' *Up and Down the Thames* (1893), published for its passengers, celebrated the 'grand and august memories' that were palpable on this 'highway of empire': 'Along this channel have passed the Briton in his coracle, the Roman in his war-ship, the Anglo-Saxon and the Dane in their galleys, the Norman, the Plantagenet, the Tudor, and the Stuart, in their resplendent barges' (Ollier 1885, 267–68).

Yet truly, Ollier should have added another invasion force to that litany of nations and powers that had taken their place in the historical pageant of the Thames: the Americans in their pleasure craft. For what has previously gone unacknowledged in accounts of the

river's Victorian renaissance and its elevation to a renewed symbol of nationhood is the significant role played by American commentators in this process. Transatlantic perspectives on the Thames proved to be some of the most meaningful and widely circulated of this moment. A litany of prominent American voices became part of the chorus hymning the river. Sketches of the Thames peppered popular periodicals. For example, Richard Grant White spent 'Sunday on the Thames' for the *Atlantic* in 1879; with no little symbolic significance, James S. Whitman paddled 'Down the Thames in a Birch-Bark Canoe' made from 'some stately birch in the Acadian forest' for *Harper's* in 1881; Warren Taylor went 'Along the Thames' for *Munsey's Magazine* in 1899. In different ways, émigrés like Whistler and Henry James dwelt at length on the river in their interpretations of England. Mark Twain, who knew a thing or two about symbolically charged national rivers, placed the Thames at the centre of *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881–2); when Elizabeth Williams Champney imagined the adventures of her *Three Vassars Girls in England* (1884), she sent them on a sketching tour down the river in the company of some eligible Oxford men: 'The boating-trip down the Thames proved a most delightful experience' (121).

Even as late as 1905, William Dean Howells produced a travel account, *London Films*, that gave particular focus to the 'national quality of the English stream' and found it 'perfectly proportioned to the little continent of which it is the Amazon or the Mississippi [...] just the right size to be held in London's arms', far more 'domesticated' than 'savage' American rivers (1905, 226–27). When the English essayist Austin Dobson took 'A Literary Ramble' along the Thames for the American *Century* magazine in 1886, he began with an equally pointed moment of comparative nationalism couched in the valences of rivers: 'I confess that I never look upon the Thames – that Thames which to me, as impenitent Londoner, is far above either Amazon or Mississippi – without feeling that my apprehension of the past [...] is strangely quickened and stimulated' (Dobson 1886, 175). Even George Dunlop Leslie, the Royal Academician responsible for one of the defining Thames books of this era, the lushly illustrated *Our River* (1881), had an American father.

No less than their British counterparts, the diverse American writers who took to the Thames were alive to the symbolic significance of the Thames at this moment. Just as a previous generation of European authors had used the Mississippi River as a means of interpreting the meaning of America in the 1830s and 1840s, so this new American cohort took to the Thames as a way of exploring England and Englishness – and, in turn, to reflect on their own relationship to those contexts. While this was a process that allowed plenty of space to extol the pleasures of messing about in boats on the river, it was also beset with Transatlantic tensions. Of all the American engagements with the river in this period, none was more redolent of its moment than Joseph and Elizabeth Robins Pennell's *The Stream of Pleasure* (1891) (Figure 1), first published as the lead article in the 'Midsummer Holiday Issue' of *The Century Magazine* in 1889 before being released (Figure 2), with minor textual differences, as a separate volume in Britain complete with the addition of a 'Practical Chapter' containing useful information for those interested in following in the Pennells' wake. As such, it was a thoroughly Transatlantic text. While the Pennells have frequently been mentioned in the list of river writings from this crowded moment, and their account is often gestured to as further evidence of the Thames craze at this time, no real attention has been paid to it. In particular, the Americanness of this account of the river has been totally neglected. This article, then, is an attempt to explore

MIDSUMMER HOLIDAY NUMBER.

## THE CENTURY MAGAZINE.

VOL. XXXVIII.

AUGUST, 1889.

No. 4.

## THE STREAM OF PLEASURE.

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY JOSEPH AND ELIZABETH ROBINS PENNELL.



UNIVERSITY BARGES, OXFORD.

EVERY Englishman has done the Thames, and the time to do it, since everything in England must be done in its season, is the summer.

Oxford is the starting-point. The few track the shy Thames's shore "above the locks, above the boating throng"; the many come downward with the flood. Once we decided upon the course of the many we were urged to change it for that of the few. But we found that above the locks, which begin near Oxford, are dams,—or "weirs," as they are called on

the Thames,—not easy to pass; and we also learned that it is the boating throng which has made the Thames the rival of any water-way in the world and given it a character all its own.

On Wednesday, the 1st of August, we drove to Salter's landing-place, though it was pouring. It had been raining more or less steadily for two months, so there seemed no reason to wait for clear weather. Hitherto we had looked upon Oxford only as the university town, but now we came to know it as the Mecca of all river tourists. Were its colleges to disappear one by one, were Ruskin to be forgotten, so long as Salter's boat-house stands by Folly Bridge it will be the trysting-place for the oarsmen of England.

Our boat, which was new, had not yet been launched, but was still at the builder's. It was a pair-oared skiff, but shorter and broader than those generally seen on the Thames—"a family boat," an old river man called it with contempt. Its great feature was the green waterproof canvas cover which stretched over three iron hoops and converted it for all practical purposes into a small, a very small, house-boat. By a complicated arrangement of strings the canvas could be rolled up and fastened on top so as, theoretically, not to interfere with our view of the river banks on bright days; or it could be let down to cover the entire boat from stern to bow—an umbrella by day, a whole hotel by night.

Salter seemed surprised to see us; why, I do not know, for two or three parties started down the river before us. In one boat a girl in a bright pink mackintosh sat in the stern under an umbrella. The men in their clinging wet flannels looked as if they had just been taking headers in the stream. In the midst of a weak and damp hurrah from one ancient boatman, the *Rover* was at last pushed off its trestles, and, with a vigorous shove, sent clear across the Thames. There was no baptism with champagne; only the everlasting rain was poured

Copyright, 1889, by THE CENTURY CO. All rights reserved.

Figure 1. Front cover of *The Century Magazine*, August 1889.



**Figure 2.** Frontispiece to *The Stream of Pleasure* (1891).

the ways in which this representative American text used the Thames as a point of Transatlantic triangulation. While on the surface of things the Pennells' account of the river is a lushly illustrated, picturesque piece of travel writing designed to capitalise on contemporary fashions, there are plenty of moments where still waters run deep and international tensions surface unexpectedly.

To fully appreciate the ways in which the Pennells' journey on the Thames floated at the intersection of powerful international crosscurrents, it is necessary to recreate the moment of its publication and the Pennells' own passage through the literary – and watery – worlds of America and Britain. Both Elizabeth and Joseph had been fully immersed in the resurgent international river cultures of the late-nineteenth century before they took to the Thames themselves, particularly through their association with other émigré writers and artists like Whistler and Henry James. No less significantly, through its literary allusions 'The Stream of Pleasure' was clearly shaped to speak to the literary war of words that was raging between Britain and America in the 1880s, not least through the avatars of Matthew Arnold and Mark Twain, both writers with deep associations to their national rivers. Rivers are not closed systems; they are spaces of profound transnational flow. And as much as they were sites of nationalism in this period, rivers were also spaces for transnational critique. Seen in those lights, then, the Pennells' journey along the Thames can be understood as a voyage that simultaneously floats them into a mythic Albion of quaint delights, but which also pulls them into a damp and stagnant Little England.

### **International waters**

Before their month on the Thames in 1889, Joseph and Elizabeth Robins Pennell had already traced a unique and prolific course through the Transatlantic literary and art worlds of the 1880s. They were married in Philadelphia in 1884 and despite their characteristic hopes for 'a wedding journey in a caravan with Gypsies', they had to settle for a trip to England (Pennell 1929, 1, 114). Immediately, the Thames dominated their experiences of the city that

would soon be their home: ‘Those first few months in London we explored the river on the penny steamboat from Greenwich to Richmond,’ Elizabeth remembered many years later (Pennell 1929, 1, 117). They lived near the river, too, when they finally decamped to London permanently in 1885, first in a ‘perfect bit of old London’ in Westminster, more permanently at ‘Number 14 Buckingham Street close to Charing Cross’, where, in Elizabeth’s description, their ‘windows looked on to the Thames as it flows under Waterloo Bridge and on, with a great curve to Blackfriars in the distance.’ The vision of ‘the dome of St. Paul’s’ rising ‘high above the river’, Joseph concluded, ‘was to him worth the rent, if we had to go hungry.’ There, for the next couple of decades, the Pennells made their home, hosting an open-house on Thursdays that became a hub for a bohemian set of writers and artists who ‘crowded our rooms to suffocation as soon as evening came’ (Pennell 1916, 125). When the Pennells finally felt the need to leave London and return to America during the First World War, Joseph made one final lithograph ‘of St. Paul’s and the Thames from our windows’, inscribing it to a friend as ‘the last drawing I shall ever make from the most beautiful studio in London’ (Pennell 1929, 2, 180).

In between times, they carved out vibrant careers, separately and together, as an author and illustrator who were rarely absent from the popular periodicals. In particular, they specialised in travel narratives that suited both of their talents – pilgrimages to Canterbury and much of the rest of England and Scotland, sentimental journeys around France and Italy, many undertaken by bicycle. As Dave Buchanan notes, the Pennells ‘produced some of the earliest and best cycle-travel writing in the early decades of the cycling age and, in the process, helped invent the idea of leisure cycle-touring’ (Pennell and Pennell 2015, ix). Yet from the start, rivers loomed large in their careers – particularly for Joseph, as one of the most in-demand illustrators of an era fixated on waterways and their relationship to national identity. Indeed, it was through rivers, both American and international, that Joseph made his name. In 1882, before his marriage to Elizabeth, one of his first commissions as an illustrator was to travel to New Orleans to work with George Washington Cable on the serialisation of *The Creoles of Louisiana* in *The Century* magazine. The journey there itself proved inspirational, and Joseph wrote and illustrated an account of his desultory voyage down the Mississippi River in a steamboat called ‘Mark Twain’ for *The Century*. If that river trip proved to be ‘a leisurely monotony which is relieved by oddities’, it was also an exercise that put him into communion with a national stream whose meaning for America was being reimaged at just that moment. His time with Cable in New Orleans was equally transformative. In Elizabeth’s words, he ‘discovered the picturesque down by the river,’ and – in spite of Pennell’s perennial spikiness – became friends with his host. In a period of high water, the pair went to witness a levee break – ‘the water tumbling, roaring, rushing through the crevasse and spreading over the cane fields’ – during the same spell of high water that Mark Twain records in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883). Indeed, if Europe hadn’t called, Pennell was one of the illustrators who was being lined up to illustrate Twain’s defining account of the river.

Instead, he travelled to Italy in 1883 with another significant literary personage to illustrate William Dean Howells’ *Tuscan Cities*. During that trip, the two explored the Arno in its different moods – both its ‘silver breadth and stretch’ at Florence and the ‘grandeur’ of the ‘mighty curve’ of the river and its ‘magnificent’ quay at Pisa – the ‘noblest thing [...] that any city has done with its river’ (Howells 1885, 122, 167, 201, 216). And still there were more rivers to discover. In 1886, Joseph travelled to France with Philip Gilbert Hamerton for *A Summer Voyage on the River Saône* (1887) – a journey that

was, in its own way, pioneering. Hamerton elucidated in the preface to their book: ‘With regard to the freshness of the material, it is believed that no Englishman or American ever before made the voyage of the navigable Saône’ (1887, xi). To begin with, things went swimmingly – ‘very beautiful – very well – very lazy’ – until Joseph became frustrated with Hamerton’s plodding commitment to traversing the whole length of the river: ‘if he hadent [sic] been an Englishman he would have completed the whole book at Châlons where we gave the boat up – but no, it must be the navigable Saône no matter how disappointing or big or bulky – and I expect – stupid it will be’ (Pennell 1929, 1:172, 175).

And there was always the Thames – particularly, for the Pennells, the expatriate Thames, most notably the visions of the river conjured by Whistler and Henry James. In later years, the Pennells’ attachment to Whistler and their guarding of his legacy would become central to their life and work. They would ultimately publish his official biography in 1908, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*, only the first of a number of publications that the couple would devote to the artist with whom, Elizabeth would assert, ‘we were far more intimate [. . .] than any one else’ (Pennell and Pennell 1921, 1). Whistler had long made the river his subject. In 1859, as soon as he moved to London he had located himself in Wapping, at the heart of urban, proletarian river life in a way that proved to be revolutionary for American art and for ideas of the Thames more generally. As Karl Beckson notes, in both etchings and on canvas, Whistler ‘focussed on a world relatively untouched by native artists’, and did so in a manner that experimented with tone, colour and abstraction in pioneering and controversial ways (Beckson 1992, 258). For the Pennells, ‘He saw the river as no one had seen it before, in its grime and glitter, with its forest of shipping, its endless procession of barges, its grim warehouses, its huge docks, its little waterside inns [. . .] It was left to the American youth to do for London what Rembrandt had done for Amsterdam’ (Pennell and Pennell 1911, 60. See also 1891). The Thames was at the heart of their relationship, too. Joseph had encountered Whistler’s work, including some of his Thames etchings, as a young artist back in Philadelphia (Elizabeth’s interest in the artist had been sparked in Philadelphia too, in conversation with the visiting Oscar Wilde). Joseph first met Whistler in person on their honeymoon trip to England. Of course, they discussed the river: ‘J. asked him about the Thames plates,’ Elizabeth recorded in her diary, ‘which Whistler said were all done out of doors. Talked for two hours’ (Pennell and Pennell 1921, 4). The effect of Whistler’s river vision on both Pennells – for Joseph, ‘he is and always will be my master’; for Elizabeth, ‘the greatest artist who has ever lived’ – was evidently profound, even if, or perhaps because, it was a vision that didn’t always find favour with the English themselves (Pennell 1929, 1:100; Jones 2012, 144).

Another kind of master, Henry James was no less alive to the significance of the Thames. Perhaps most famously, it appeared as a crucial element of the ‘peculiarly English picture’ that James painted at the beginning of *The Portrait of a Lady* – ‘the great trees, the reedy, silvery Thames, the beautiful old house’ (1881, 3, 13). Not long before the Pennells undertook their own summer on this ‘dear little river’, to borrow Isabel Archer’s description of it (James 1881, 33), Joseph was commissioned to provide the illustrations for Henry James’ account of ‘London’ for *The Century* (as he would also do for James’ *English Hours* in 1905). In James’ impressionistic sketch of the city, the Thames plays a small but vital role. James celebrates the river as ‘altogether such



a wonderful affair', fully aware of the ways in which the Thames is 'an adjunct of London life, an expression of London manners.' As such, he acknowledges the contemporary vogue for boating on the upper river in terms that seem sardonic in their praise: 'In its recreative character it is absolutely unique. I know of no other classic stream that is so splashed about for the mere fun of it.' For James, the propensity of 'the mighty population' to head to the river 'on the smallest pretext of holiday or fine weather' is both 'droll' and 'touching', and 'suggestive of the personal energy of the people.' The Thames was, therefore, in a telling phrase, 'the busiest suburb of London', but 'also by far the prettiest.' For James himself, the prospect of splashing about in boats held only such charm, though he professed to be 'always more or less thrilled, of a summer afternoon, by the journey, on a penny-steamer, to Greenwich.' It was, like Whistler before him, the urban and industrial city river that really charmed James most: 'I like it best when it is all dyed and disfigured with the town and you look from bridge to bridge – they seem wonderfully big and dim – over the brown, greasy current, the barges and the penny-steamers, the black, sordid, heterogeneous shores' (1888, 236–37).

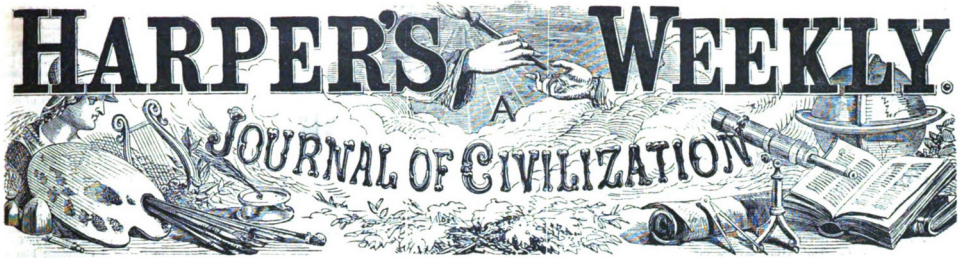
Pennell's illustrations followed his lead, and his renderings of the urban river (some clearly evoking Whistler) appear throughout the article. According to Elizabeth, James sent an appreciative letter in which he concluded that he would give up writing 'to be able to draw like Pennell – never had he worked with so responsive an artist' (Pennell 1929, 1, 206). Others have agreed. As Amy Tucker has noted, Pennell was in many ways 'a coproducer of the "Jamesian" image of Europe' – one which, blending the picturesque and the modernist, was marked out by 'self-consciously subjective and impressionistic attempts to reenvision the experience of the American abroad' (2010, 170, 171). Even before the Pennells took to the Thames, therefore, Joseph's illustrations positioned him as one of the most significant river interpreters of his moment.

### Transatlantic tempests

Alongside their deep immersion in the riverine culture of the late-nineteenth century, the Pennells were also soaked in the war of words between Britain and America that roiled the 1880s. There were fluvial elements to this conflict, too. At times, ripples of Transatlantic tensions could be easily discerned on the waterways of both countries. A vivid example can be found in the quintessentially English surroundings of the Henley Regatta. The famous rowing event had been founded in 1839 and had become a staple of the social calendar in the decades since its establishment. Yet this event, a centrepiece of many descriptions of the river, became the site of significant Transatlantic conversation in 1878 when American rowers arrived to compete on the Thames. Fittingly, that year's competition began on July 4th. While Americans gave a strong showing in a number of events, it was Columbia's victory in the race for the Visitors' Challenge Cup (against University College, Oxford and Jesus College, Cambridge) that caused the greatest sensation. The symbolic significance of this American victory on the British national stream was apparent from its coverage in American periodicals. *Harper's Weekly* magazine devoted a cover to the competition (Figure 3), as well as providing portraits of the victorious rowers and the trophy that they had secured. According to *Harper's*, 'The victory of the Columbia crew excited the greatest enthusiasm among the Americans abroad, and the news of their magnificent achievement was received here with universal

# HARPER'S WEEKLY.

A JOURNAL OF CIVILIZATION.

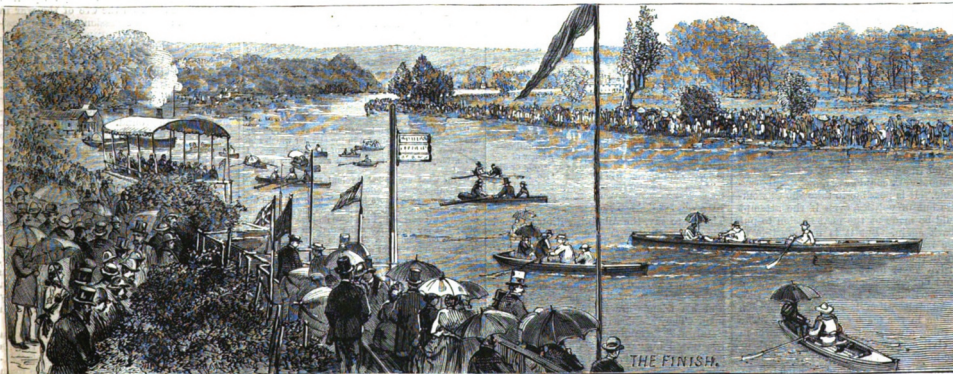
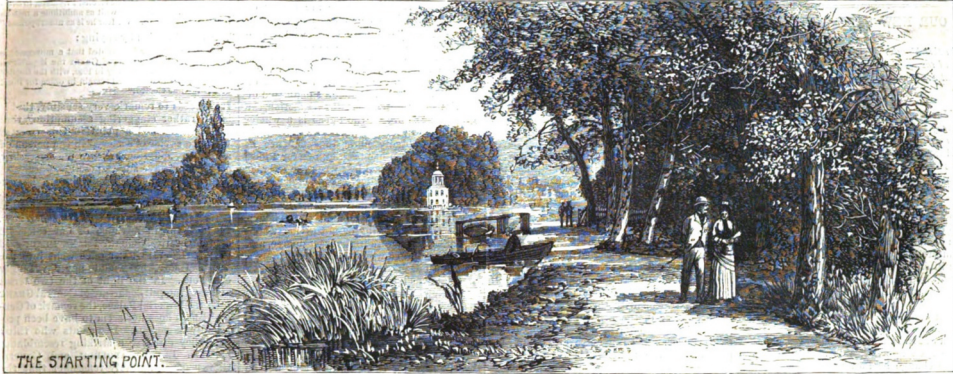


Vol. XXII.—No. 1125.]

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, JULY 20, 1878.

[WITH A SUPPLEMENT.  
PRICE TEN CENTS.]

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the Year 1878, by Harper & Brothers, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, at Washington.



THE HENLEY REGATTA COURSE—A QUIET DAY FOR PRACTICE BEFORE THE RACE.—FROM PHOTOGRAPHS.—[SEE PAGE 570.]

Figure 3. Front cover of *Harper's Weekly*, July 20, 1878.

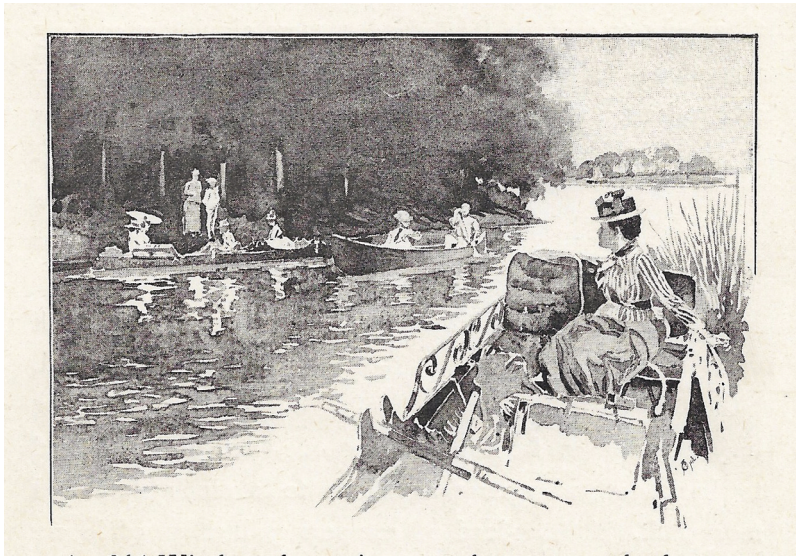
satisfaction' ("The Americans at Henley" 1878, 570). Across the Atlantic, *The Illustrated London News* was magnanimous, noting that 'One of the most generally popular victories of the day was that of the Columbia College crew [. . .] as every one would have been sorry to see the plucky Americans fail to take a prize' ("National Sports" 1878, 30).

Yet that bonhomie wasn't quite the whole story. The *Pall Mall Gazette*, for one, had been asking questions about the ways in which rules governing amateur status were being applied to American teams even before the race. After the American victory, they were asking those – and other questions – more forcefully: 'The presence of the Americans no doubt gave the regatta something of novelty, and added greatly to the interest. As their entries were accepted without objection, it is too late to cavil at or question their claims to amateurship. It will suffice to say that if any English club had sent up such representatives [. . .] the stewards would have been told that they really must draw the line somewhere' ("Henley Regatta" 1878, 4). Since that line hadn't been drawn, the *Pall Mall Gazette* felt it necessary to raise another issue: what if the Americans stole the trophy? 'There was some discussion among the stewards on Thursday whether, in the event of any challenge prize being won by Americans, some security should be required for its safe return to this country' since 'some mushroom Yankee club might win a prize another year, and be dissolved the next, and there would be no body corporate to whom to apply for restitution' ("Henley Regatta" 1878, 4). What's more, they concluded – 'without prejudice' – that Jesus would have won the race, if they hadn't experienced an 'accident to their steering gear' ("Henley Regatta" 1878, 5). The potency of the symbolic national value attached to this waterborne competition on the Thames is evident. The Pennells were part of this world, too, and its questions of nationalism and class: in later life, Joseph remembered when his 'very first publisher [. . .] took me out rowing on the Thames where, to his horror, I appeared in a top hat. But I hid it, as did some of the *The Century* people on their first visit to the Regatta at Henley' (Pennell 1925, 165).

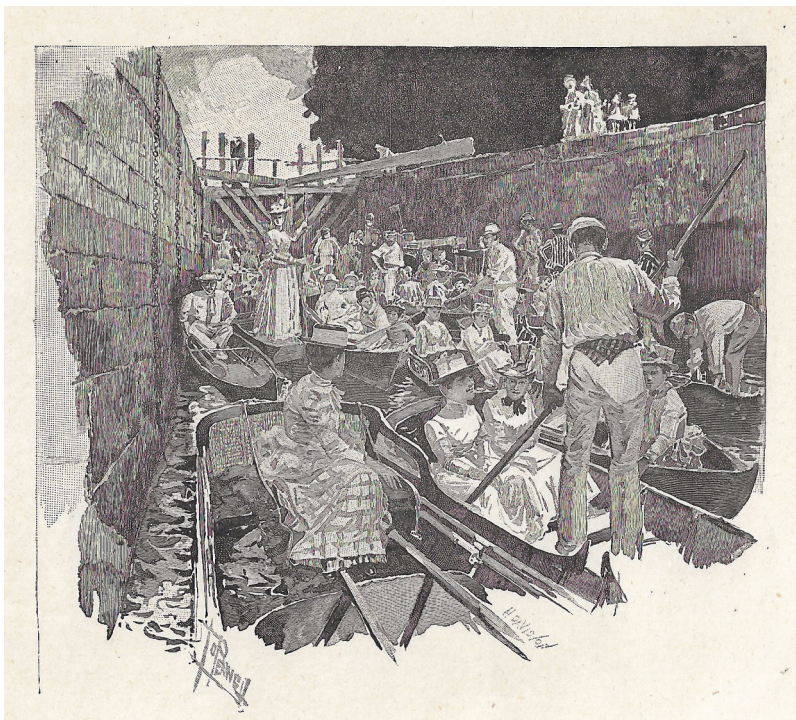
If the wider literary skirmishes that characterised this period were rarely so immediately river-focussed, rivers still had a role to play in their unfolding, particularly in the form of the avatars who stood on the front lines of those battles. Near the beginning of 'The Stream of Pleasure' (Figure 4 and 5), Joseph spends an afternoon sketching Iffley Mill, an illustration that is included in the *Century* article. Elizabeth, however, amuses herself – and him – by reading 'Thyrsis' while the rain continues to fall. Her gesture here is of course to Matthew Arnold's 1865 pastoral elegy to his friend Arthur Hugh Clough (who, as it happens, was also a friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson). The Pennells' reading matter is apposite: 'Thyrsis' is saturated with memories of boating on the Thames during Arnold's years at Oxford University:

Where is the girl, who by the boatman's door,  
Above the locks, above the boating throng,  
Unmoor'd our skiff when through the Wytham flats,  
Red loosestrife and blond meadow-sweet among  
And darting swallows and light water-gnats,  
We track'd the shy Thames shore?  
Where are the mowers, who, as the tiny swell  
Of our boat passing heaved the river-grass,  
Stood with suspended scythe to see us pass? –  
They all are gone, and thou art gone as well! (Arnold 1867, 79)

Indeed, the central presence of the Thames in the lamentations of 'Thyrsis' picks up on persistent river themes that Arnold had established much earlier in his career, and long



**Figure 4.** Elizabeth observing her fellow Thames travellers. From *The Stream of Pleasure*, 115



**Figure 5.** A crowded lock. From *The Stream of Pleasure*, 129.

before the Thames had become a hackneyed topic. In ‘The Scholar Gypsy’ (1853) Arnold had already valorised the ‘sparkling’ upper river near Oxford as a place of pastoral escape from ‘this strange disease of modern life, With its sick hurry, its divided aims, Its head o’ertax’d, its palsied hearts’ (213).

Of all the many English effusions to the Thames that Elizabeth could have chosen to mention at this moment, selecting Arnold's 'Thyrsis' feels particularly pointed. Arnold was one of the central figures in a Transatlantic argument that had been raging for a number of years. Controversy surrounded a number of Arnold's ex cathedra pronouncements about American life and culture in this period, comments that were only exacerbated by his lecture tour around America in 1883 and 1884. As E. P. Lawrence summarises, Arnold could not help 'expressing and showing annoyance' at facets of life that he encountered on his lecture tour, something that caused an 'unpleasant clash' with American audiences in ways that 'served to strengthen Americans in the belief that all Englishmen were snobs' (1931, 63). His criticisms of Emerson – in Boston no less – didn't help things.

Arnold's most significant intervention in Transatlantic relations came in his article 'Civilisation in the United States', published in *The Nineteenth Century* in April 1888 just before the Pennells' summer on the river. Aware that intervening in the question of 'how the human problem is solved in the United States' was a 'delicate matter', Arnold prefaced his commentary with an admission of admiration for 'their institutions and their solid social condition, their freedom and equality, their power, energy, and wealth' (1888a, 481). Arnold was also frank about what he felt to be the pernicious effects of 'a system of classes so intense' in England: 'we [...] find ourselves with an upper class materialised, a middle class vulgarised, and a lower class brutalised' (1888a, 482, 494). Yet ultimately, he was unsparing in what he felt to be America's 'weak side.' First, with his own sense of environmental determinism, he judged that there was 'little to nourish and delight the sense of beauty there [...] the landscape in general is not interesting, the climate harsh and in extremes.' America lacked the 'charm of beauty that comes from ancientness and permanence' (Arnold 1888a, 488). This, combined with a lack of 'awe and respect' in American society more generally, led Arnold to conclude that 'a great void exists in the civilisation over there: a want of what is elevated and beautiful, of what is interesting' (1888a, 491).

Not all American commentators lined up to pillory Arnold. Henry James had rather kinder words for the critic with whom he clearly shared affinities. In particular, in an essay written for the *English Illustrated Magazine* in 1884 while his subject was still touring America, James highlighted what he found to be the value of Arnold 'to an American in England, and indeed to any stranger': 'He discharges an office so valuable, a function so delicate, he interprets, explains, illuminates so many of the obscure problems presented by English life to the gaze of the alien; he woos and wins to comprehension, to sympathy, to admiration, this imperfectly initiated, this often slightly bewildered observer' (1884, 241). Yet more broadly, America struck back. James B. Fry, for example, immediately took Arnold to task in the *North American Review* in May 1888, particularly taking umbrage at Arnold's dismissal of American nature: 'This is a shallow as well as an unjust criticism [...] of a country [...] possessing nearly every form and shade of beautiful landscape' (1888, 517–18). Of course, some Americans had already taken the fight to England – most notably, William Dean Howells and Charles Dudley Warner. In the same issue of *The Century* magazine in November 1882, they fired off a double salvo. Howells wrote an article about Henry James in which he raised his American contemporary above the old gods of England: 'The art of fiction has [...] become a finer art in our day than it was with Dickens and Thackeray,' Howells declared, to no little controversy (1882, 28). Later in that same issue, Charles Dudley

Warner painted a picture of ‘England’ that was less than flattering. He evoked a ‘water-soaked’ island characterised by long winters and an ‘inhospitable climate’ which was nonetheless, he begrudged, ‘the most vital influence on the globe’ (Warner 1882, 134). Conversely, Warner concluded that the English simply couldn’t understand America or Americans (‘When he visits America and sees it, it is a puzzle to him’), and also predicted ‘continual divergence’ between the literature of the two countries (1882, 141).

No one, though, seems to have taken more offence at the attacks of Arnold and others across the Atlantic than Mark Twain. There were good reasons why the avatar of the Mississippi should have felt personally targeted by the champion of the Thames. In ‘A Word About America’ in 1882, Arnold had referred directly to the ‘Quinionian humour of Mr. Mark Twain, so attractive to the Philistine of the more gay and light type both here and in America’ (1888b, 92). Then, as part of his thesis that ‘everything is against distinction in America’, Arnold particularly lamented what he termed America’s ‘addiction to “the funny man,” who is a national misfortune there’ – a slight that Twain took personally (1888a, 489). Rumour also had it that Arnold went to pay a visit to Howells during his tour of America, only to find that Howells himself was paying a visit to Twain – ‘Ah,’ Arnold lamented, ‘but he doesn’t like that sort of thing, does he?’ (Lawrence 1931, 74). An apparently pleasant social call between Twain and Arnold followed, but it didn’t heal the wounds (see Baetzhold 1970, 97). An Anglophile in the 1870s, a newly radicalised Twain took to the front line of the Transatlantic war of words. In unpublished diatribes against Arnold, and even after Arnold’s death in 1888, Twain sharpened his knives (see Hoben 1946, 206–7). The public flourishing of his animus came in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, Twain’s satire of England old and new (a portrait that did not find favour in England). As one of the Connecticut Yankee’s improvements of Arthurian England, Twain pointedly included a very particular innovation: ‘We had a steamboat or two on the Thames’, a loaded image of America laying claim to England’s river (1889, 513).

That the Pennells were aware of this significant Transatlantic debate is evident, and not just because it involved, as central players, contemporaries with whom they had close working relationships. Elizabeth and Joseph had gone to see Matthew Arnold lecture on his tour of America, in Philadelphia, before their departure for England: ‘a frigid affair,’ Elizabeth concluded (Pennell 1929, 1, 110). And the pair also made ambiguous reference to Arnold in one of the earlier travel accounts, *A Canterbury Pilgrimage* (1885). After a particularly dispiriting conversation with a local who disparaged both Canterbury cathedral and the Pennells’ beloved bicycle, Elizabeth noted ‘I now understand why it is that Mr. Matthew Arnold thinks the average Briton so very terrible’ (Pennell and Pennell 1885, 51). But more, they were implicated in some of Arnold’s critiques of America. In his 1888 essay, Arnold noted that ‘The American artists live chiefly in Europe; all Americans of cultivation and wealth visit Europe more and more constantly’ (1888a, 489). The Pennells were a case in point. Joseph, particularly, was hardly an unalloyed patriot. In later life, following his repatriation during the First World War, Joseph complained that America was ‘the dreariest, stupidest, stodgiest, snobbiest place on earth, and if it was not the most picturesque I would leave to-morrow’ (Pennell 1925, 165). Those tensions and ambiguities all flow along the Pennells’ ‘Stream of Pleasure.’ And Arnold makes one final, notable appearance in that piece, too. When Elizabeth and Joseph reach the town of Laleham, they are suffering from ‘depression’ because of the

weather, the ‘gray banks, a gray river’; as such, they conspicuously forget to pay their respects at Arnold’s fresh grave (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 498).

### ‘The stream of pleasure’

The immediate context for the publication of ‘The Stream of Pleasure’ is evident. It was the lead story in the August 1889 issue of *The Century* magazine (the most popular magazine in America at that moment). More pointedly, this issue was clearly marked out as the ‘Midsummer Holiday Number.’ As such, the Pennells’ trip along the Thames was immediately positioned as the kind of escapist, aspirational travel sketch that was ubiquitous in popular journals at this moment. It was juxtaposed with a pair of all-American travel sketches – an ‘Afternoon at a Ranch’, part of a series of ‘Pictures of the Far West’ by Mary Hallock Foote (a rare illustrator who provoked the approval of Joseph Pennell), and an account by Frederic Remington of ‘Artist Wanderings Among the Cheyennes’. Taken together, in Richard Brodhead’s terms, these kinds of sketches were the ‘great staple of these journals, the virtually mandatory item in their program of offerings,’ loaded with contemporary concerns of class and national identity at the moment when ‘the American elite perfected the regimen of the upper-class vacation,’ particularly the European tour (1993, 125). The Pennells were past masters of this form.

Yet despite its apparently anodyne framing, the Pennells’ had already demonstrated that this ‘mandatory item’ of the popular press could also be a vehicle for significant Transnational critique. The year before their journey on the Thames, they had taken a truly miserable trip to Scotland. ‘Our Journey to the Hebrides’, which followed in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, saw the Pennells recount their doleful passage by foot through a place that they found to be characterised by ‘the tyranny of the few, the slavery of the many.’ The gulf they found between the poverty of locals and the wealth of landowners, visiting sportsmen and other tourists led them to assert that ‘this land, which holiday-makers have come to look upon as their own, is the saddest on God’s earth’ (Pennell 1888, 500, 496). In the preface to the book that followed, Elizabeth recorded that the pair were ‘severely criticised’ for their comments – the *English Churchman*, no less, describing her as ‘an evidently vulgar American’ (Pennell and Pennell 1889b, v; Pennell 1929, 1, 218). Yet it also sharpened her sense of the realist purpose of the couple’s travel writing – not to provide ‘second-hand descriptions’, but to ‘go to a country and tell what really happened to you’, regardless of what the critics will say (Pennell and Pennell 1889b, v).

Their turn to the Thames, then, took place just as the Pennells were themselves dragged in to the Transatlantic culture war, and sharpening their sense of the significance of their travel sketches. In that context, floating along a waterway that was ripe with national symbolism feels like a particularly pointed choice of summer destination. Their Transatlantic perspective of Englishness permeates the text, and what results is a subtly sardonic account of life along the river that proves, in its own way, to be arguably more biting than the contemporaneous satire of Jerome K. Jerome. And yet, the Pennells also remain open to the picturesque delights that the Thames, and by extension England, has to offer. As such, it is a text that perfectly encapsulates the tensions of its moment.

Elizabeth’s gently mordant tone is evident from the first lines. ‘Every Englishman has done the Thames,’ begins the version published in *The Century*, with a certain sense of ennui, conformity and obligation, ‘and the time to do it, since everything in England

must be done in its season, is the summer' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 483). From the start, then, the foibles and follies of Englishness are as much on the Pennells' agenda as the river itself. There is an equally pointed sense of environmental determinism: 'it was pouring [...] It had been raining more or less steadily for two months' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 483). In short, the weather is consistently 'vile', with only brief flashes of sunlight (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 491). This England is no less waterlogged than that pictured by Charles Dudley Warner in his inflammatory sketch in 1882. Still, in another pointed comment on the national character, the river also bears along an equally persistent number of dogged, damp pleasure seekers, the men ridiculous in their 'clinging wet flannels.' They are also a keynote of the sketch.

When the Pennells' first take ownership of their new boat – dismissed as 'a family boat' by 'an old river man [...] with contempt' – it receives no 'baptism with champagne; only the everlasting rain' (1889a, 483). These are only the first of a number of rude, representative male figures that the Pennells encounter along the river. Like Jerome's three men in a boat, their slapstick misadventures on the river are a constant theme. Immediately, too, a sense of peril is introduced. Suitably fluvial, Elizabeth's prose is at once light and babbling and fraught with dangerous undertows. She makes it clear that they are 'two persons who knew nothing about boats and could not swim' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 484). As soon as they have launched, they 'come to a dead stop in mid-stream [...] I had never steered, J – – had scarcely ever rowed a boat' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 484). So begin their 'frantic efforts' to master the Thames (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 484). That comic dread is soon heightened when they encounter their first river monster – the challenge of Iffley Lock, 'one of the dangers to be remembered on the river journey' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 484). That dread is bathetically undercut, though, by the very English bureaucracy of the 'Thames lock ticket': 'It admits you,' Elizabeth explains, 'through, by, or over the lock weir for threepence. That is, I suppose, you can go through the lock in Christian fashion, drown under the weir [...] but whether you come out dead or alive, for any of these privileges the Thames Conservancy will have its ticket' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 484). Contemporary officiousness jars with the Thames' pretensions of epic grandeur. When the pair do run into a mud bank near Abingdon, the nearest thing to an 'accident' that they actually encounter, the Pennells 'made believe we had stopped to look at the view' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 486).

The contrast between the Pennells' lack of boating expertise and the bullish English proficiency that they repeatedly encounter frequently has a Transatlantic edge to it, heightened by multiple references to Tom Brown, the eponymous hero of Thomas Hughes' famous 1852 novel *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857) and, more significantly here, its sequel, *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1861) – a book in which rowing and the question of who has 'the best boat on the river' dominates the narrative (Hughes 1871, 1, 209). In the American edition, dedicated to James Russell Lowell, Hughes made clear his intentions of guiding 'the young men of New England and Old England' alike in the ways of 'purity, and manliness, and truthfulness' (1871, iv). Against such archetypes of masculinity, evoked by Elizabeth's multiple references to Tom Brown and his experiences on the Thames, the figures of 'half a dozen wretched men' camping on the riverbank opposite seem immediately ridiculous (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 484). Her critique of the Tom Brown type becomes more pointed when she and Joseph encounter 'a party of flanneled record makers who were in fine spirits because they had sculled twenty miles since morning' at their boarding house (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 487). The rowers are



unimpressed when, after they call for beer for breakfast, Joseph asks their landlady for jam: 'we're training to make our four miles a day' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 487). 'After this,' Elizabeth reports, the rowers 'would have nothing to do with us, but drank whisky and wrote letters' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 487).

Other similarly irritable, and irritating, Englishmen flow through the narrative. There is the owner of Mapledurham House whose land on the banks of the river is 'barricaded by the sign "Private" [...] he has lately asked the courts to forbid fishermen to throw their lines in the Thames, as it flows past his estate' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 489–90). A 'cross old man' needs to be coaxed 'into selling me green pease and berries' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 489). A pompous fellow-traveller 'who had a glass screwed in one eye [...] quite forgot to look where he was going himself, and bang went the bow into a post and over he tumbled into a heap of tents and bags at the bottom of the boat' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 497). Just downriver from Windsor, a group of soldiers – 'their little caps still stuck on their heads, but their elegance taken off with their coats' – tumble about 'in old tubs' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 496). Conversely, 'to show they are not common folk, the boating men of Wargrave go so far as to make themselves ugly and wear a little soldier cap stuck on one side of their heads' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 491). On Sundays, men are neatly divided into two: 'one half in top hats and conspicuous prayer books, the other still in flannels and carrying hampers instead of towels' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 493). The brittle veneer of English masculinity and its concern for appearances frequently crumbles in Elizabeth's account of the Thames, just as a related sense of grim conformity colours much of the Pennells' time on the river. 'On the river everyone makes afternoon tea,' Elizabeth describes, 'just as everyone wears flannels, and so of course we felt we must make it with the rest' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 487).

The same subtle undermining of men and manners can be found in the account of the English landscape through which they travel. The idylls of Arnold's 'Thyrsis' set a template that Elizabeth constantly plays with. For Arnold is not the only British poet to feature in Elizabeth's narrative. Moving from the sublime to the ridiculous, the dominant poetic voice of 'The Stream of Pleasure' is actually James Sadler, a longtime lock keeper at Sonning who was famous for his roses, his bees, and the doggerel that he self-published in a series called *Summer Recreations*, for sale to river tourists. Elizabeth quotes liberally from his verse, particularly his account of a 'Trip Down the Thames' – what she describes as 'the simplest description ever written of the journey from Oxford to Windsor' (490). Sadler's effusions pepper Elizabeth's prose, simultaneously a quaint evocation of little England and an absurd undermining of the Georgic visions of the river which proliferated at this moment. For example, Elizabeth quotes, with clear delight, Sadler's paean to Reading: 'Mong other things so widely known/For biscuits, seeds, and sauce' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 490).

Picturesque details still abound in Elizabeth's narrative, as they do in Joseph's illustrations: 'In all Thames villages,' she asserts, 'the elements of picturesqueness are the same; in each they come together with new beauty' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 489). The scene they discover at Mouldsley Lock – 'the headquarters' of summer fun on the Thames – is lovingly described: 'Not even [...] on the Grand Canal in Venice is there livelier movement, more graceful grouping, or brighter colour' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 499). It is a 'beautiful pageant', for all that 'the English take their pleasure quietly' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 499). But in keeping with the commitment articulated in *Our Trip to the*

*Hebrides* to avoid guide-book platitudes, neither are the Pennells shy about critiquing the sights they encounter. Continually, ‘ugly’ houses spoil the view; indeed, ‘as a rule, the big private houses on the Thames are ugly’ (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 489). Sandford Lock is ‘an ugly blot on the scenery’ (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 485). Houseboats ‘do not add much picturesqueness to the river’ (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 488). Park Place boasts a ‘grotesque boat-house’ (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 492). Great Marlow is ‘a disappointment’ (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 493). There is a ‘stupid stretch’ of river between Mapldurham to Caversham (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 490). Perhaps most tellingly, the picturesque bubble of the river is burst by an amusing anecdote which was not included in the *Century* article, but features prominently in the later book edition. At the beautiful village of Clifton Hamden, so the story is told to the Pennells, John Ruskin was contemplating the multiple delights of the view. Spotting a boy on a bridge across the river leaning far over the parapet, Ruskin pondered what he was contemplating. Was it the ‘beauty of the evening’ or the ‘hurry of the water’? Or had the Thames ‘awakened him to higher and holier thoughts?’ At that moment, a boat drifted beneath the bridge, the boy leaned further out, and ‘spat upon the oarsmen’, before making a swift getaway (Pennell and Pennell 1891, 44).

Alongside such unromantic disappointments runs a sense that the Thames has been ‘done to death’ (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 489) by English poets and travellers and artists. Goring Church, for example, is such a hackneyed subject that it ‘is almost as familiar in modern English art as the solitary cavalier once was in English fiction’ (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 489). Instead, the Pennells give preference to those spaces which are away from the mainstream – the ‘backwaters’, the ‘most beautiful of which’ are those which ‘seem to tire of running with the current, and turn from it to rest where lilies blow round long islands’ (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 486). They are a conspicuous image of independence in a river journey freighted by convention. Perhaps the Pennells’ preference for the backwaters is also a telling Transatlantic gesture. Their Americanness, and the presence of other American signifiers on the river, is palpable throughout the text. References to ‘two real canoes’ that the Pennells’ repeatedly encounter named the *Minnehaha* and the *Hiawatha* evoke Longfellow and the Mississippi; in one guest house, a volume of Whitman shares shelf-space with George Eliot, Carlyle and Thackeray (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 486, 488). They find echoes of Wissahickon Creek in terms that ‘Philadelphians and New Yorkers will understand’, and to Atlantic City and Coney Island (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 490). ‘What good American,’ Elizabeth asks her compatriots at Hampton Court, ‘who has been in England does not love this most beautiful of English palaces?’ (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 500). At one moment, the river crowded with pleasure-seekers, the Pennells spot a canoe ‘with an entire family on their knees paddling as if from the wilds of America or Africa’ (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 494). Through such continual gestures, the Pennells make it clear that this apparently hermetic and impeccably English space is also an American space – that English exceptionalism is perhaps not so exceptional. Yet the Pennells also make it clear that some of their clear-sightedness as travellers on the Thames is the result of prolonged Transatlantic exposure. Witnessing a picnic at Medmenham, Elizabeth recalls seeing the same sight four years ago when they had been in England ‘but a few weeks’ and imagining that ‘nothing could be prettier’ than the old abbey that stood close-by. Now, however, ‘having seen much of England’s loveliness [...] we were not so much impressed’ – familiarity having bred, if not contempt, then certainly a wariness

for the obvious and immediate pleasures of the English picturesque (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 493).

Arguably the Pennells' most resonant image of English life on the Thames, informed by both their Transatlantic perspective and their prolonged exposure to England in comparison to most American tourists on the stream of pleasure, comes at the symbolically loaded locations of Magna Carta Island and Runnymede. This spot on the river was a totemic one for English Thames travellers. Even Jerome K. Jerome played it serious when dealing with such topics; his three men are transported in a reverie back to the moment when 'the great cornerstone in England's temple of liberty' was laid: 'Little was in sight to remind us of the nineteenth century; and, as we looked out upon the river in the morning sunlight, we could almost fancy that the centuries between us and that ever-to-be-famous June morning of 1215 had been drawn aside' (1889, 175, 180). In a poem written for C. R. L. Fletcher's notoriously jingoistic *A School History of England* (1911), Rudyard Kipling also evoked this moment, and the river itself, as guarantors of English liberty:

And still when Mob or Monarch lays  
Too rude a hand on English ways,  
The whisper wakes, the shudder plays,  
Across the reeds at Runnymede.  
And Thames, that knows the moods of kings,  
And crowds and priests and suchlike things,  
Rolls deep and dreadful as he brings  
Their warning down from Runnymede! (75–76)

The Pennells, though, picture things a little differently. Magna Carta Island is not a space for transportation into a mythic past; it still holds the key to English identity, but it has rather different contemporary resonances. For the Pennells, it is a site where 'the barons claimed the rights which they have kept all for themselves ever since, and where two or three pleasure parties were picnicking, and a private house stands on the spot so sacred to English liberty' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 497).

In keeping with the rest of their journey along the river, its end is quotidian and unromantic. At Teddington, they are greeted by 'the familiar smoky smell' of the city (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 500). The 'Stream of Pleasure' gives way to 'the river that runs through the world of work' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 500). Yet arriving at the end of their journey early in the day, they decide to carry on down the river to Richmond. And so, for their final day on the river, the Pennells are accosted by every one of the boat agents that they pass. 'Everybody expected us to stop,' Elizabeth explains (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 500). But they carry on regardless, still charting their own course in the face of English expectations, until their stream of ambiguous pleasures comes to an end in the 'great noise of London' (Pennell and Pennell 1889a, 500).

The Pennells' time on the Thames in the wet summer of 1888, long ignored as simply another template account of the river which merely echoed the fashions of its moment, should rightly be understood as a significant Transatlantic intervention in the conception of the English national stream at the height of its symbolic powers. Deeply intertextual, and fully aware of the significance of their status as Americans writing about this nationally charged space at this particular moment, the Pennells' vision of the 'The Stream of Pleasure' stands alone in its probing interpretation of English society on the river, and in its use of the river as a site of Transnational

critique. Veiled in the gestures and aesthetics of the travel sketch, the Pennells use the river to stage a sustained critique of English identity and culture – picturesque, yes, but hardly the idealised, timeless, hermetic nationalist space that was continually being conjured in literature and art. No less than its partisans, the Pennells find plenty of fertile sediment in which to grow a telling portrait of the national character; an eroding force like the river itself, their journey down the Thames continually scours the layers of myth and illusion that have accreted along its banks. The Pennells would visit other waterways in their long careers – a summer on the Marne for *The Century* in 1906; a trip to the Panama Canal for Joseph in 1912; even a return to the Thames for a sketch of ‘The Oxford and Cambridge Race’ in 1898. Yet their summer on the Thames in 1888 represents a neglected apotheosis of their hybrid art, in which the symbolic significance of their journey chimes with their drive for a new verisimilitude in travel writing – as well as for the broader symbolic conception of the river in the international imaginary at this crucial moment. The Sonning lock-keeper-cum-poet James Sadler began his paean to the Thames with an exhortation to the pleasures of the local:

For strange and novel beauties  
So widely people roam,  
And often miss the loveliest spots  
That lie about their home.  
We aim not to disparage  
Or weaken other claims,  
But where can fairer scenes be found  
Than on the river Thames? (1882, 3–4)

Though susceptible to the pleasures of this stream, real and imagined, the Pennells’ cosmopolitan, Transatlantic perspective throughout their summer journey raises a sceptical eyebrow to that kind of parochialism, well aware that the waters of the world were international wanderers just like them.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Thomas Ruys Smith* is Professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of East Anglia, UK. His most recent book is *Deep Water: The Mississippi River in the Age of Mark Twain* (LSUP, 2019).

## References

- “The Americans at Henley.” 1878. *Harper’s Weekly*, July 20.
- Arnold, M. 1853. *Poems*. London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans.
- Arnold, M. 1867. *New Poems*. London: Macmillan.
- Arnold, M. 1888a. “Civilisation in the United States.” *The Nineteenth Century*, April 1888, 481–496.
- Arnold, M. 1888b. *Civilization in the United States*. Boston: Cupples and Hurd.

- Ashton, R. 2017. *One Hot Summer: Dickens, Darwin, Disraeli and the Great Stink of 1858*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Baetzhold, H. G. 1970. *Mark Twain & John Bull: The British Connection*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Beckson, K. 1992. *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Brodhead, R. 1993. *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Byerly, A. 2013. *Are We There Yet? Virtual Travel and Victorian Realism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Champney, E. W. 1884. *Three Vassar Girls in England*. Boston: Estes and Lauriat.
- Cusack, T. 2007. "Introduction: Riverscapes and the Formation of National Identity." *National Identities* 9 (2): 101–104. doi:10.1080/14608940701328050.
- Dobson, A. 1886. "A Literary Ramble: Along the Thames from Fulham to Chiswick." *The Century*, June 1886, 175–185.
- Fry, J. B. 1888. "Mr. Matthew Arnold on America." *North American Review*, May 1888, 515–519.
- Hamerton, P. G. 1887. *A Summer Voyage on the River Saône*. London: Seeley.
- "Henley Regatta." 1878. *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 6, 1878.
- Hoben, J. B. 1946. "Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee*: A Genetic Study." *American Literature* 18 (3): 197–218. doi:10.2307/2920832.
- Howells, W. D. 1882. "Henry James, Jr." *The Century*, November 1882, 24–29.
- Howells, W. D. 1885. *Tuscan Cities*. Boston: Ticknor.
- Howells, W. D. 1905. *London Films*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Hughes, T. 1871. *Tom Brown at Oxford*. Vol. 2. Boston: James R. Osgood.
- James, H. 1881. *The Portrait of a Lady*. New York: Houghton, Mifflin.
- James, H. 1884. "Matthew Arnold." *English Illustrated Magazine*, January 1884, 241–246.
- James, H. 1888. "London." *The Century*, December 1888, 219–239.
- Jerome, J. K. 1889. *Three Men in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Dog)*. Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith.
- Jones, K. M. 2012. "'Making a Name for Whistler': Elizabeth Robins Pennell as a New Art Critic." In *Women in Journalism at the Fin De Siècle: Making a Name for Herself*, edited by F. Elizabeth Gray, 129–147. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kipling, R. 1911. "The Reeds of Runnymede." In *A School History of England*, edited by C. R. L. Fletcher. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lawrence, E. P. 1931. "An Apostle's Progress: Matthew Arnold in America." *Philological Quarterly* 10: 62–79.
- "National Sports." 1878. *The Illustrated London News*, July 13, 1878.
- Ollier, E. 1885. "Battersea to London Bridge." In *The Royal River: The Thames, from Source to Sea*, 255–287. London: Cassell.
- Pennell, E. R. 1888. "Our Journey to the Hebrides: First Paper." *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, September 1888, 489–503.
- Pennell, E. R. 1916. *Nights: Rome, Venice, London, Paris*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott.
- Pennell, E. R. 1929. *The Life and Letters of Joseph Pennell*. Vol. 2. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Pennell, J. 1925. *The Adventures of an Illustrator*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Pennell, J., and E. R. Pennell. 1885. *A Canterbury Pilgrimage*. London: Seeley.
- Pennell, J., and E. R. Pennell. 1889a. "The Stream of Pleasure." *The Century Magazine*, August 1889, 483–500.
- Pennell, J., and E. R. Pennell. 1889b. *Our Journey to the Hebrides*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Pennell, J., and E. R. Pennell. 1891. *The Stream of Pleasure: A Month on the Thames*. London: T. Fisher Unwin.
- Pennell, J., and E. R. Pennell. 1898. "The Oxford and Cambridge Race: Play in London." *The Century*, October 1898, 905–913.
- Pennell, J., and E. R. Pennell. 1906. "A French River: The Lovely Marne from Its Source to Paris." *The Century*, June 1906, 186–197.
- Pennell, J., and E. R. Pennell. 1911. *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*. London: William Heinemann.
- Pennell, J. 1912. "Building the Panama Canal." *The Century*, August 1912, 567–574.

- Pennell, J., and E. R. Pennell. 1921. *The Whistler Journal*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott.
- Pennell, J., and E. R. Pennell. 2015. *A Canterbury Pilgrimage/An Italian Pilgrimage*, Edited by D. Buchanan. Alberta: University of Alberta Press.
- Readman, P. 2018. *Storied Ground: Landscape and the Shaping of English National Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Robertson, H. R. 1875. *Life on the Upper Thames*. London: Virtue, Spalding.
- Sadler, J. 1882. *Summer Recreations (No. 5): A Trip down the Thames from Oxford to Windsor*. Reading: J. Read.
- Taylor, W. 1899. "Along the Thames." *Munsey's Magazine*, May 1899, 247–255.
- Tucker, A. 2010. *The Illustration of the Master: Henry James and the Magazine Revolution*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Twain, M. 1889. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. New York: Charles L. Webster.
- Victoria Steamboat Association. 1893. *Up and down the Thames*. London: Hodder Brothers.
- Warner, C. D. 1882. "England." *The Century*, November 1882, 134–141.
- Wells, H. G. 1909. *Tono Bungay*. London: Macmillan.
- White, R. G. 1879. "A Sunday on the Thames." *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1879, 787–796.
- Whitman, J. S. 1881. "Down the Thames in a Birch-Bark Canoe." *Harper's Monthly*, January 1881, 211–217.
- Wilde, O. 1881. *Poems*. London: David Bogue.
- Wilson, D. G. 1997. *The Victorian Thames*. Oxford: Oxfordshire Books.